MARY B. SINCLAIR is mining the sounds of silence...

by Lydia Eccles ~ June, 2012

Mary B. Sinclair is a bold, outsider writer from Allston, Massachusetts who has recently seized the opportunity of internet-based DYI publishers to begin writing brilliant, funny and liberating books. She has invented a hybrid of memoir, melodrama and political revelation that demolishes all boundaries between personal, political and spiritual, and allows for an eruption of emotions and ideas about the paradoxes of social control in American democracy.

In Sinclair's vision, the money-driven social system, like a fairy tale witch, casts us under a spell--by an illusion of freedom and opportunity—the better to speed production, imprison us in class roles, stereotype us and shrink our souls. If you can't or won't fit into your place, you must be stretched or amputated. Sinclair is out to break that spell by counter-reversing the perspective to reveal the truth. She calls her writing "an underground railroad."

Sinclair's work is striking in several ways. Her books seem at first to be escapist romance fiction, as we enter into the tumultuous mindflow of a restless, single woman--she will doubtless wind up finally finding her perfect match. But quickly Sinclair's women burst that formula with ideas like: "Life was like a fire within her that kept burning and burning. That wanted to burst its boundaries and connect up with the fire of the world. But she couldn't. Because the world had no "fire" to it." The unfulfillment of these women isn't individual, it's social. They have oversized, Amazon souls.

Their story is that they have been deprived of a story. Without a plot, we are drawn into their emotion-fueled spiraling thought process, as they dwell on the meaning of experiences and struggle to glimpse what invisibly holds them back. (Each has a history of asking priests, professors or psychologists inconvenient questions, raising contradictions, connecting the wrong dots.)

The spiritual hunger for significance becomes, in Sinclair's hands, life-or-death melodrama. Vivid metaphors plunge us into emotional extremes of loneliness, humiliation, and despair, but also rage, rebellion, hope, and even rapture. Pent-up intensity pours out in voluptuous images:

"Margaret now felt as though all her life up to now had been spent little by little building up a gigantically beautiful Sand Castle on the beach with a thousand different rooms (and memories) inside. (With a thousand magnificent views outside each and every window)…he had aimed a torrential, monumental downpour of acidic urine all over Margaret's precious Sand Castle, inundating, polluting and eradicating everything."

Melodrama proliferates, since Sinclair's story-starved characters immerse themselves in media, the more lurid, scandalous and sensational the better, seeking to metaphorically investigate their own predicaments through emotional identification. They become kaleidoscopes of stories from songs, news, ads, movies, talk radio, tabloids, movie star magazines, celebrity bios, fairy tales, current fiction and classic literature. Patty Hearst, Princess Di, disgraced politicians, Hedda Gaebler, Afghanistani bombing victims, Natalie Wood, Lawrence of Arabia, Lindsey Lohan. "I will sympathize with whom I damn please," a Sinclair character asserts, in the face of her therapist's disapproval.

A realization emerges that they (and we) are trapped in an Orwellian double bind--social control succeeds by denying control; and the mental health system plays a key role in maintaining the illusion of benevolence and silencing those who suffer out loud. ""Mental patient" is in fact really another name for "political prisoner," reflects one of Sinclair's protagonists.

The unexpected reversal of fortune (which every melodrama needs) is that within our media folklore, hidden in plain view, is a secret resistance movement, an emotional underground of both suffering and longing for wholeness, unity and love—the collective truth the system must suppress to keep us under its spell. Sinclair writes of how to use stories not for escapism, but for escape.

Her own stories can guide you to into the emotional underground. Read them with Wikipedia, and follow the all trails she lays to other stories. When you encounter "how you suffered for your sanity" from the pop song Starry, Starry Night, look up the entire lyrics; then follow these to the life of Vincent Van Gogh. It all resonates and amplifies. Her books have no boundaries, they send out tendrils interconnecting a cosmos of stories that vibrate together as one. Sinclair condenses her writing mission: "mining the sounds of silence." We are all misfits.

When I arrive at Allston's Twin Donut to talk to Mary Sinclair, I find her immersed in "The Deep End of The Ocean," by Jacqueline Mitchard, over two eggs, sunnyside up.

What can you tell me about your background?

I was born in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire at Huggins Hospital in 1942, but I've lived in Boston all my life. I attended State Teacher's College on Huntington Avenue, since I had planned to become a teacher. However, that plan never got off the ground. So I went back to twenty years later. First I earned an Associates Degree in Word Processing from Roxbury Community College; then I attended UMass Boston where I graduated with a B.A. in English, and I'm accumulating credits toward my Master's.

Why did you begin writing books just three years ago?

All my life I wanted to write, but for a very long time, I put it off and read other people's books, not only to develop my own skill, but because it's hard to know exactly how to get your foot in the door.

...and taking a blowtorch to conformity.

When I was in High School, I had a teacher who wanted me to write. She thought I had a lot of talent. As she aged, however, she developed a damning opinion of writers. She began tuning in to the presence of so many slimy, undesirable traits in writers, such as arrogance, egotism, troublemaking and focusing too much on commercially fruitful, but ethically undesirable, topics in order to sell books. Topics such as "murder and mayhem" and playing off the dark side to make money. When I tried to contact her alot of years later--maybe I shouldn't have--I felt she took all that out on me more than she should have. But in retrospect, I understand that in so many ways she was absolutely right. I feel that way about writers myself, almost as though they're a kind of necessary evil.

> *Of course, no one ever heard about these "Sounds of Silence." No one ever heard about these invisible stories. And to Margaret, the real question was, if a tree fell in the forest and no one was there to hear it, did that tree really fall?*

I'll also give honorable mention to my former English Professor, Eliot Ernest, an unpopular Englishman who influenced my early life--from a distance--in unimaginable ways, both good and very bad.

What's it like using a DIY internet publisher?

Traditional publishing companies want to red-pencil everything to ensure conformity to the highly over-rated mainstream perspective. And it's impossible to get your foot in the door. With self-publishing my writing isn't changed around to fit a preconceived agenda. The true meaning of what I have to say is undisturbed.

So many mainstream books echo each other's thoughts in order to sell. I never wanted to just write the kinds of books through which I might gain recognition, perhaps, but in the process, sacrifice my differences with the mainstream. It's in the very nature of a writer--at least my kind of a writer--to be a rebel and a non-conformist.

As those in the Occupy Movement are doing now (with much more success for the most part-- although some have been cruelly pepper sprayed and have had to be hospitalized with broken bones, etc.), I have tried all my life to engage in a dialogue with those in authority. First in the educational system, then in the Catholic Church, then in the mental health system. And finally in the voting booth, when I tried to express my point of view politically. In each one of these settings, however, there was no dialogue in the true meaning of the word. Instead it was a system of control set up to deny that control and appear democratic.

And, although it was better than a dictatorship, on paper anyway, there were so many aspects to it that were like hidden land mines--just waiting to go off--that I made a promise to myself that if I ever got into a position to do so, I would do my best to bring this entire invisibly-orchestrated prison of control into the naked light of day.

I vowed to create my own force field through which I could give uncontaminated voice to all the concerns that had troubled me so greatly over the years. And for which, when I had previously tried to dialogue about them, I had been so cruelly mocked, treated like a criminal and made to suffer.

What life experiences inform your writing?

Like both Nora Zeale Hurston in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" and Toni Morrison in "Beloved," I am not ashamed to say that I also grew up in enough horrible dives, in the "wrong" parts of town, to qualify me as an expert three times over on pain, suffering and anomie. In order to survive, I ended up having to overcompensate from within and become too much of an individual, in ways that don't work very well in a system that values conformity above all else.

So although I'm not black, like Nora Zeale Hurston or Toni Morrison, I consider myself supremely qualified to bring into the light of day--not only for my own satisfaction but to help others--my singularly agonizing experiences in a world that thwarts you at every turn, no matter what color your skin.

I could spit at someone who stereotypes others solely based on age, appearances and present circumstances. That way of distancing yourself from others is the opposite of democratic. And that's a big part of what motivates me to write my books--not to identify and authenticate myself as a "lower class" person, but to promote and keep alive the idea of real democracy.

Can you discuss "It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To:?"

It's about grieving, in particular about my grief over my mother's death about four years ago. It's also about how, many years ago, my Uncle Arnold was left to die on the highway when going for his Eagle Scout badge at age sixteen. While he was attempting to pass his last test—equestrian expertise—his horse was spooked suddenly by traffic and threw him off, whereupon the "good citizens" in the community left him where he had fallen, and a blood clot formed on his brain leaving him partially paralyzed for the rest of his life. All through my childhood, the story of Arnold's tragedy was repeated. Being so young, I had nowhere to go with this. I had no answers. I still don't. Except to say that people need to share family background stories not only to widen their own perspective, but to pass on the often bloody torch of survival.

It's also a coming-of-age at a much later stage of your life memoir told from the point of view of a procrastinating social butterfly playgirl who wanted to put off growing up forever, for all the right reasons. I wanted to compare and contrast my "before" and "after" feelings about life. How, in the beginning, there is a huge, monumental, overpowering buildup of positive feelings and how, after a while, a terrible disillusionment sets in because there is nowhere to go with them.

It's fun to recognize Allston in your books, the "fear change" tip jar at the old Herrell's. And the horrible, hilarious blind dates in "Twilight Side of the Hill" occur right down the street at Dunkin Donuts and the former Sports Depot.

Every personals ad dating ordeal I write about in the book was experienced first-hand by me. With real blood flowing, and no Hollywood makeup artistry either! "Twilight" is a self-help memoir that is one hundred percent based on real life--my own.

> *And her answer, (which came from the depths of her soul) was a resounding yes, that tree really and truly did fall.*

"It's Easy To Be Smart With Someone Else's Heart: The Sound of Your Own Wheels" is your first book to focus on "soft" authority, specifically priests.

With all the problems plaguing the Catholic Church right now, is this the time to bring up yet another one? Maybe yes, maybe no. But, in any case, it doesn't hurt to try. This is a memoir of agony and extreme frustration over the Church's incredible stupidity surrounding birth control policy, and how it impacts the lives of loyal Catholics who want to believe in Church teachings, but are torn between a rock and a hard place.

A Catholic all my life, I have experienced first hand how those in charge always tell you: "Take it easy, calm down, listen to those who know best." They might say, "We'll talk about it," but all their endless talking ever accomplishes is to underwrite their own ideas. I found out the hard way that their ultimate goal is to influence you to accept that what you should want from yourself is the same as what the Church wants for you. The "sound of your own wheels" refers to all of that: People do need to pay more attention to the sound of their own wheels--rather than just ignoring everything or allowing it to be written it off as "mental illness."

"Mining the Sounds of Silence: Therapy in American Life" uncovers unexpected class dynamics. For instance, your protagonist doesn't feel abandoned when her therapist goes on a luxury vacation, as he claims; she's upset because she can't afford to go on one herself.

I wrote this book to give voice to the profound dissatisfaction and outrage I experienced over the years with the hypocrisy of the "helping" professions. Every book on the market on this subject merely parroted back every other one like a never ending vicious circle of monkey talk from which there was no escape. And since nothing that came before satisfied my desire for the truth, I was forced to blaze my own trail. It became almost an obsession to me to uncover the ideological infrastructure of the therapy profession, and to be able to put this into words in a way that would be genuinely challenging, and not reactive.

Those who see therapists do so because they're fighting with the world. They're often more spiritual and are in conflict with worldly values. Any kind of agony and despair generated by social control is automatically interpreted as by therapists as "mental illness." Those in very trapped, socially-threatening situations often feel a great consuming need to touch base with someone--to make their situation understood--even though the possibility for exploitation is ever present, and it may not be in their best interest to do so.

God--or the idea of God--represents the ultimate understanding Being. But since there is no God, objectively speaking--but nevertheless a horrific, crying need for one--what you get is therapists trying to play God, an extremely painful, dangerous kind of abuse. The invisible and well-meaning –perhaps--philosophy of therapy is to use personal experience in what can often end up becoming abuse--using notions like "projection" to imply a subconscious distortion in how the client sees things; discrediting clients by ferreting out dirty secrets that aggrandize their own authority and control. The client is often overpowered and manipulated by this hidden subtext. And, as with the Catholic Church through the centuries, confession is how therapists gain their hidden power. But if personal experiences are owned by the client, this tends to cut therapists off at the pass. My books teach how to own--and customize--your own personal experiences.

I embrace the writer's inkblot--not the therapist's Rorschach inkblot. I demonstrate how personal experiences, owned by the person who has had them, are all that really counts, because they tell the truth in a way that so-called "objectivity" never can. And buying into all those arrogant, too-worldly therapeutic slogans such as, "life is what you make it," "you brought it all on yourself," etc., etc. can turn you overnight into a deviant and a criminal. In contrast, the protagonists in my books are defined as being beset by outside forces--corrupt, political, money-driven forces. Instead of tarring and feathering society's victims, I portray them correctly…as the total good guys.

In Phantom, Jill escapes the conflict with authority that torments your previous protagonists. What do you mean by "falling down the rabbit hole" with the Phantom? Embracing social stigma?

Redefining everything and creating new values. Words like "amoral" and "immoral" are reworked to be broader, more tolerant, workable and user-friendly. Day has become the real night. Because people have been blinded by the light for so long. Light has long since ceased to lead people down the pathway to truth, but has become instead a cover-up for lies and deception. Darkness, in contrast, has become the new truth of endless possibility which was the original basis for the glorious promise of America.

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is about the attempt of ostensibly civilized--or enlightened--men to colonize the savage heart of Africa. I quote this in Phantom as a perfect example of what's still going on in the world today--and very much so--the imperialistic war in Iraq, for example. Mental health professionals are also "colonizers." Like those supposedly enlightened men from the Central Office in Conrad's story, who try to control and dominate others--finally, in all too many cases, destroying them--by imposing their false, too-worldly values and way of life.

Phantom looks at repression through other stories too, like the fairy tale Beauty and the Beast and "The Sound and the Fury" by Faulkner...

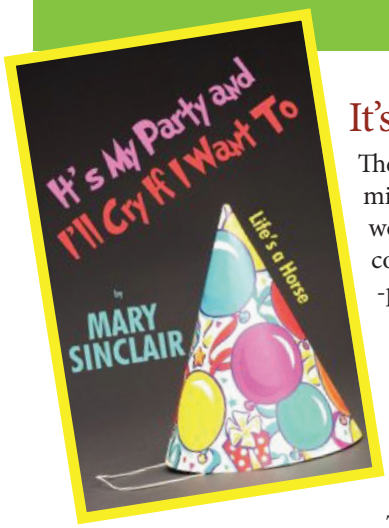
The Beast dwells underground because he has been "polarized"--or foreshortened--out of existence by the values of the world. Like the true heart and soul of humanity itself, which he represents, he has not been acknowledged, blended into the mainstream. He has had to hide his true identity by hiding underground, live "in the closet." Hide his passion, his indomitable spirit and his unconquerable soul beneath the drab and wilted mask of an ugly beast.

Quentin, although portrayed by Faulkner as a "dreamer and a fool," did wrestle with his demons, but he did it in a way that ultimately did not work for him. Poisoned and psychologically disempowered by his father's rigidity and nihilistic way of life, he became a casualty. Instead of standing his ground and successfully challenging his father's corrupt philosophy and values, he committed suicide by drowning himself. He was not able to find a way out.

In Phantom, Jill --unlike Quentin-- refuses to allow the social worker to kill her spirit. Instead, after hearing "Phantom of the Opera" on the radio she falls down the rabbit hole with the Phantom and brings herself to life again on an emotional, intellectual and spiritual level.

And, in my opinion, that's what people turn to writing for: to pick up the pieces of what's gone wrong and restore their unconquerable soul.

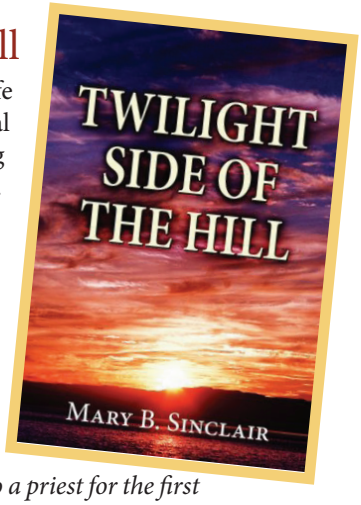
MARY B. SINCLAIR



It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To: Life's a Horse

The bad feelings started when her mother passed away after a virulent bout of pneumonia. Jennifer misses the wonderful feeling of her mother planted like a powerful stone wall between her and the world. She can no longer say or do all the "right" things at the going-nowhere-party her life has become. She feels raw, ludicrously uncomfortable, like an unwelcome--indeed embarrassing and sinful--presence..."What can you say to a naked lady?"

Twilight Side of the Hill



A personal ads dating disasters memoir. When Julie's dating life hadn't gotten off the ground she began toying around with personal ads. And Julie was good at it. Had the ability to spin out a glowing fishnet of words which captured a lot of fish...

They met at Burger King, and he told her his wife had passed away several years previously from congestive heart failure. Julie felt very sorry for him as he described in great detail the horror of watching his wife slowly slipping away before his very eyes...

It's So Easy To Be Smart With Someone Else's Heart

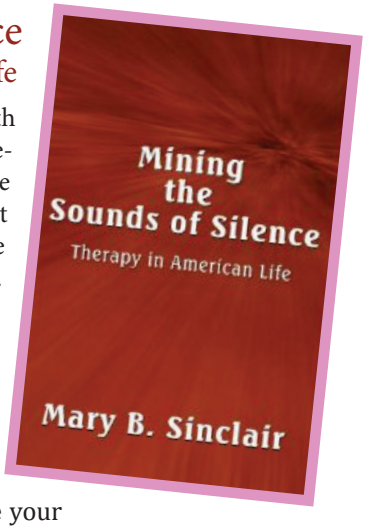
The Sound of Your Own Wheels

She remembered with great clarity now the exact day when she had spoken to a priest for the first time. At first she hadn't called it a misake. That realization hadn't come unti much, much later...

Louise had blind faith because that was what was expected of her but as she grew older and wiser she began questioning the Catholic Church's rules. At the beginning, Louise only questioned priests in the secrecy of the confessional. But, after a while, she had thrown caution to the wind. Now, if they saw her coming, they would go the other way.

Mining the Sounds of Silence

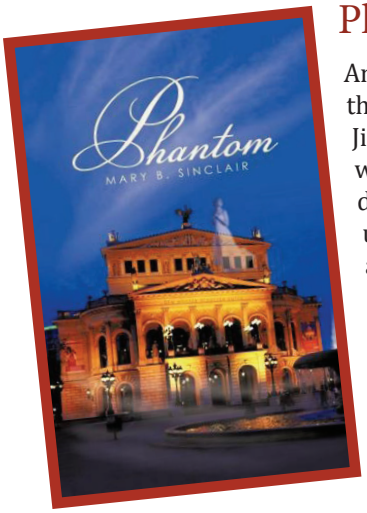
Therapy in American Life



When Margeret tried to put her own point of view into words with therapists and explain her ideas and motivation, it was worse than useless. Because although therapists gave you the feeling they were "there for you," it was only a feeling. Their real priority? Humanizing the chain of command. It meant "being there" for you as long as you were willing to become the person they were trying to make you into...But they were not "there" for the person you really were.

*Patients **appeared** negative but underneath were really the positive ones...*

Phantom



American Democracy encouraged people to believe that a light at the end of the tunnel was always there for them....and the point that Jill had tried to make to the social worker was that the real America was not all about what the Statue of Liberty proclaimed: "Bring me your downtrodden, your outcasts, your suffering and your poor." That the American system--underneath its colossal pretense of rolling out a red carpet to the underdog--in so many ways actually thrived on ridicule and humiliation.

But by universalizing the template of ideas from the song, "Phantom of the Opera" into a metaphor for her own life and simultaneously joining forces with the plight of so many others within America today in the visionary Occupy movement, Jill can orchestrate--and define--her own protest movement. Phantom casts a tumultuous spell.

American Paranoia

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